

## *It's More Than the Catch*

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On a hot June afternoon in the Florida Keys I caught my first tarpon. It wasn't a huge fish, around 60 pounds, but it put on an aerial display like no fish I had ever seen. The fish simply did not want to be caught, and did everything it could to free itself. For me it was truly a memorable experience, but one that was bittersweet. When we finally got the fish alongside the boat, it was apparent that tarpon had given everything it had and then some. We attempted to revive the fish but were unsuccessful, and watched as it drifted off, belly up, with the current. What should have been an incredibly satisfying moment was now spoiled. To me, my first tarpon catch was not a success.

As recreational anglers, we have all probably heard (and read) about it a million times. Search the internet and you are likely to find thousands of articles documenting "best practices" for releasing fish. For the most part, the guidelines are consistent: Minimize handling, hold the fish horizontally to support its weight, aerate until the fish can swim off on its own, if possible leave the fish in the water, and at least a half dozen other practices that help to maximize the chances of the fish surviving after being released. Scientists refer to it as "post release mortality" or simply "discard mortality", and numerous studies have been done in an effort to better estimate what portion of released fish do not survive. In fact, this number is a critical (and often disputed) element in stock assessment models used by fishery managers. However, to recreational anglers, especially those that regularly practice catch and release, the release should be more than just a number. In catch and release fishing, catching the fish, especially a large one, has typically been the measure of success on any given trip. Anglers often forget that catch and release consists of two components, both of which need to be successfully achieved. Catching a fish is an emotional activity. The rush of adrenaline when a big fish jumps, the sickening feeling of losing the tournament winning fish at the boat, or the pure frustration of not catching anything. There should be emotion attached to the release as well. Imagine catching an exceptionally large fish. Consider how old that fish might be. A trophy red drum (>30 lbs) is an old fish, and is often older than the angler who catches it. Also consider if that trophy fish were a female, the contribution of offspring is going to be greater than that of a smaller fish. As anglers, through catching a fish we have been presented with a fantastic opportunity. We have been rewarded with the excitement of the catch, and through the release we can experience the satisfaction of repaying that reward.

As I recall the image of that tarpon floating away I think about what more I could have done that would have allowed that fish to survive. The bottom line is that I didn't do what was necessary. What I took away from that experience is something that all anglers should consider when practicing catch and release. If you put the same amount of effort into ensuring the healthy release of the fish as you put into catching it, you will be making an investment for the future.